Bad Farming One Cause of the High Cost of Living

And Prof. Binder Finds That the Agricultural Halo Slipped When Middleman Was Eliminated

THE price of food is undoubtedly an economic question. But back of the soaring prices is a fundamental sociological problem. We must recognize this fact if we hope to bring about any permanent general betterment.

The farmer, like the rest of us, is intensely human, and there are many who stand between him and our daily bread that are actuated by the prime motive of self-interest. And, finally, the ultimate consumer is not a philanthropist, and when the burden of high cost comes upon him he is ready to blame every one but himself—a thoroughly human characteristic.

Such, in substance, is the conclusion reached by Prof. Rudolph M. Binder of the chair of sociology at New York University in a discussion of the causes of present high prices.

Prof. Binder has studied the foodstuff problem for some years, and has especially given attention to the middleman as a factor in it. In describing attempts to get rid of him he describes just what happened in one notable instance.

"The University of Wisconsin, which has gone in for so many social or economic experiments, was convinced that the middleman was not necessary," he said. "Accordingly the university authorities set about trying to get the farmer and the consumer closer to one another.

"For a while the results were encouraging, but as time wore on discouraging difficulties grew apace and now the university has substantially abandoned its campaign. Of course, those unfamiliar with the Wisconsin effort want to know why the project fell through. The story is one of human frailty; the yellow streak in the 'honest farmer' came to the surface.

"At first the farmer packed his shipments with prime products. The orders were sent to him by mail, and gradually the zones of distribution widened. Mr. Farmer then said to himself: 'That man has ordered a package of goods, and he has got to take it as it reaches him. Of course, he is a long way off and some of the shipment would be likely to suffer. Why not, then, send him some seconds underneath the top layers of prime goods?'

"When complaint came in consequence from the purchaser the 'honest farmer' glibly proposed to make a trifling discount that would still leave him an unfair profit on his inferior wares and a full return upon his 'firsts.' The further away the customer was from the shipper the greater became this breach of faith.

"Mutual distrust crept in, as might be expected, the farmer doubting the purchaser in his turn, and mutual recrimination brought about a state of affairs which became intolerable. It was only natural that the project should fall through. Commercialism on the part of the farmer was substituted for the commercialism of the middleman and became even more flagrant because of the remoteness of the purchaser.

"An imperative social need called the middleman into being; and the greater the distance between the producer and the consumer the more necessary the middleman. We cannot legislate him out of existence. He has his part to play between the farmer and the housewife just as he figures in the distributive machinery which exists between a manufacturer and his ultimate market.

"We may be able to control the middleman, but we cannot get rid of him through productive plenty. In fact abundance is more apt to make him indispensable than otherwise, for upon him rests the problem of finding markets and maintaining profitable prices.

"The tendency in all fields of production is toward specialization, and this calls for coordinating agencies between the producer and the consumer—the consumer in some cases being himself a producer of another sort. This specialization would be neither practicable nor profitable without the middleman.

"The middleman has undoubtedly abused his position, and we know that this was charged by the farmers during the late milk strike. This interruption in the dairy business would be impossible in Spain. There the cow or goat is driven to the door, and the milk is delivered from the animal in full measure just when wanted. This procedure is impossible here, and a complex organization has been called into being which has many phases.

"Human material is the ultimate strength of the social fabric, and likewise determines business relations. We have got to take human nature pretty much as we find it. We cannot legislate it into being or legislate it full of virtues, but by wise laws we can regulate it provided we back those laws with the machinery of execution.

"This concerns the farmer just as it does any one else, and he has to learn that it is his duty to make the most of his acres and in turn to give honest measure and quality to those that trust him. This will always be possible, and he will find it profitable if he works his land as is done by the most industrious farmers abroad.

"Things have changed greatly here in the last half century in our agricultural life. Fifty years ago a farmer had to spend three hours working the soil to produce a bushel of wheat; to-day, he can do this in three minutes, thanks to engineering cunning. In other words, one man to-day, in the production of a bushel of wheat, does what would have required the joint labors of sixty men in the field two-score years and ten ago.

"But while machinery has made this possible the great majority of our farmers have failed to consider the soil. They have not only worked it to the point of productive poverty, but they have failed dismally to utilize their acres with a view to their future as well as to their present yield capacities.

"Figures in abundance have been quoted of late which make it clear that American farmers are generally years behind the best of their European competitors in making the most out of their acres. The ultimate consumer must pay the price of this indifference or incompetency, call it what one may.

"A little study of conditions emphasizes the fact that there is no need to urge American farmers to spread their efforts over a greater territory. The thing to do is to make them realize that it is possible to do far better with the fields at present in their keeping.

"Government statistics reveal a situation that few of the general public are aware of. In cold figures we can read the economic history of agriculture for the better part of the last two decades. The farmer has not been doing his part; he has not kept pace with the march of national progress, and yet his standard of life has radically altered and he wants the things that his prosperous and industrious neighbor can afford by reason of well directed effort.

"Sixteen years ago there were 5,737,372 farms and ten years later there were 6,361,502 farms, showing an increase in a decade of substantially 10.9 per cent. The acreage owned in 1900 was 556,040,051, and this was amplified in the course of the succeeding ten years to 598,554,617 acres, an increase of 7.6 per cent.

"This property was in the hands of owners, tenants and managers. Between 1900 and 1910 the number of farms operated by managers decreased 1.7 per cent., the number of owners increased 8.1 per cent. and the number of tenants working farms was augmented 16.3 per cent. It will be noticed how considerable was the growth of the army of tenant farmers; and to these men as a class the nation is indebted for a conspicuous betterment in agricultural progress. This is not hard to understand when we realize their original status and their objective.

"To a great extent the best of these tenant farmers are either immigrants or the sons of immigrants. To put it figuratively, they came here with only an onion in their pocket and their ambition was to possess a golden apple. This naturally meant work, and hard work at that, and a very large percentage of them have profited by agricultural practices developed in Europe. In other words, they know what intensive farming means, they realize the part balanced farming plays in the efficient operation of limited acres, and they are keenly alive to the real meaning of economy.

"From 1900 to 1910 the increase in value of farm lands and the buildings thereon amounted to 109.5 per cent. The farms worked by owners increased in value 101.7 per cent., those under the control of managers increased 88 per cent. and the lands occupied and tilled by tenant farmers appreciated 131.2 per cent. Here we have the very best evidence of what the tenant farmer is doing, and it is safe to say that the difference in the increase in value between the acres operated by the farmer owner and the tenant farmer was actually much greater in the case of the tenanted lands than that shown by the two sets of figures.

"This is disclosed by Government data giving the added acreage in improved land in the farms of the United States between 1900 and 1910. The total of this improvement amounted to 15.4 per cent. Owners added to their tilled land 11.4 per cent., managers increased their crop bearing acres 12.9 per cent. and the tenant farmers swelled the size of their fruitful fields 24.7 per cent.

"Now let us see what was the measure of financial betterment accruing to all of our farmers during the ten year period represented by the fiscal years 1899 to 1909, and as a general index let us take the standard cereals as a basis of calculation.

"In 1899 the crop amounted to 4,438,857,013 bushels and ten years later the harvests netted 4,512,464,465 bushels, the actual increase in productiveness amounting to only 1.7 per cent.! In 1899 the value of that crop was $1,482,603,049, as against $2,665,539,714 in 1909, an increase of 79.8 per cent. There is a very striking lesson to be drawn from these figures.

"Manifestly, the entire farming industry of the country during that decade produced but little more at the end of the term than it did at the beginning, and yet the value of the crops mounted steadily until they showed a gain at the end of ten years of nearly 80 per cent. During that interval the area of improved lands had widened 15.4 per cent., but despite the greater acreage the crops increased but 1.7 per cent.

"One is naturally prompted to ask, 'Why did the value of the crops augment so disproportionately?' Simply because our population had gone on increasing year by year, bringing in its train a steadily growing demand for foodstuffs. Our farming industry as a whole did not keep stride with the needs of a multiplying population and their very prosperity, strange as it may seem, was mainly the direct consequence of their indifference.

"The public is to-day paying the cumulative penalty of this course. Also the farmer is feeling the reflex of his failure to foresee the inevitable. He has simply given the middleman an opportunity to dominate the situation and the farmer is fundamentally to blame.

"The public is often given to understand that the farmer is unduly oppressed by debts and more often than otherwise is laboring under the burden of a heavy mortgage. In 1900 the number of farms free from mortgage was 2,510,654, and in 1910 there were 2,621,283, an increase of mortgage free farms of 4.4 per cent. On the other hand, the mortgaged farms in 1900 numbered 1,127,749, and ten years later had grown to 1,327,439, an increase of 17.7 per cent.

"In the previous decade, from 1890 to 1900, the increase in mortgaged farms was 27.1 per cent., while the increase in farms free from mortgage during that period was 11.3 per cent. The reason for the mortgage figures is primarily that a large percentage of the land owned was untilled. The farmer added to his acreage but did not make the added acres productive. Let us make this even plainer.

"In the case of farmer-owners the average area per farm in 1900 was 152.2 acres, of which 76.2 acres were improved or under cultivation. In 1910 the average farm consisted of 151.6 acres, of which 78.5 acres were yielding crops. The average tenant-farmer in 1900 had 98.3 acres and of these 61.9 were improved. Ten years later his farm averaged 96.2 acres, but 66.4 of them were cultivated.

"In 1900 at that rate the farmer-owner worked 50 per cent. of his acres and ten years later he had bettered this by only 2 per cent. The farmer-tenant, on the other hand, had 63 per cent. of his acres under cultivation in 1900 and by 1910 he had improved upon this 6 per cent. Again we see the tenant-farmer in the lead.

But even so neither of them was attending to his business properly because the net increase in the total crops of the country, measured by the standard cereals, was but 1.7 per cent. in the course of a full decade. To put it bluntly the farmer to-day has little if any general improvement to show in the way of better agriculture during the past six years. He has missed his golden opportunity and in proportion to the acreage at his disposition he has actually gone backward.

"Some farmers assert that capitalistic ownership has interfered with their prices and by way of support for their contention cite the fact that there are millions of acres of land held by a few people here, in some cases individuals controlling an area equal to one-half of New England or the whole of South Carolina. But as a matter of fact most of these great tracts are not under cultivation and therefore not in competition with farmers. Besides these great holdings are really only a very small per cent. of our total farm lands.

"To revert to the matter of mortgages, it must be borne in mind that a mortgage does not of necessity represent poverty nor a hampering burden; it may be the necessary means toward social betterment. Out of the total number of farmers in the United States 4,763,256 were born here and only 669,556 were born abroad. The latter represent a large per cent. of our farmer mortgagers.

"These people had to borrow to come to this country, and they borrowed again to get their farms. The great majority of them succeed in their work, and in the end are able to own the land. But, curiously, there is an aftermath to this struggle which hampers progress.

"The immigrant farmer of certain nationalities hates to part with his land later on, and at a time when he must turn to his sons to manage his acres. He wants to make his boys tenant farmers and not owners, and frequently rather than help them to independence he will drive them away from home by his stand, his fields being left untilled to a considerable extent in consequence. Cases of this sort are sufficiently numerous to have a direct bearing upon the agricultural situation of the nation.

"The farmer's cost of living has increased no doubt, and even if we put this at 50 per cent. we must place opposite it the vastly augmented value of his crops. The farmer has never lacked for food, speaking generally, and it is safe to say that his added outlays have gone principally to secure luxuries. Within reason, this is quite pardonable, but his higher standard of living is generally out of all proportion to his administrative efforts.

"Prosperity has in too many cases turned the farmer's head instead of spurring him on to attend more intelligently to his business. Here is where the personal equation has come in, and the result is not one to boast of.

"Abundance has caused these men to be gripped with the desire to become gentlemen farmers, in other words to get away from the drudgery of working and even the labor of directive responsibility. This is particularly evident among those farmers who have inherited their lands from a thrifty farmer father. These sons of sturdier and more industrious parentage have acquired habits of luxury. They want to hold on to their farms and to place the burden of making them profitable upon the shoulders of tenants. Failing in this, their productive acres either decrease or those that are sown are not worked to advantage.

"Probably one of the best indices of the present day habit of mind of farmers lies in the fact that something like 1,500,000, if not more, own motor cars. These are not so much an aid to better farming or farm administration as they are to pleasure and convenience. It was told me not long ago that nearly every farmer in Kansas has his automobile, and that a farmer thinks nothing of motoring miles to town, frequently in order to go to the theatre.

"The motor car has thus displaced the horse, yet the animal returns a helpful measure of fertilizer to the soil and draws much of his sustenance from the roughage on the land. The machine, on the other hand, is a continual source of expenditure, costs much more than a horse in upkeep and returns nothing of benefit to the soil. This has nothing to do with motor trucks owned by some farmers and actually engaged in useful and remunerative service.

"And, finally, the 'oppressed farmer,' abusing his opportunities, comes to the Government and asks for loans when he finds it difficult or impossible to obtain money from the people who know him best, and the Government, catering for votes, passes a bill designed to make it easier for the farmer to procure financial assistance at a low rate of interest.

"The Government either does not know or deliberately ignores the real situation. Prosperity has smiled upon the farmer, his indifferent crops and his lands, improved and otherwise, have greatly increased in value, and yet instead of making the most of his chances for his own good and for the good of society at large, he has simply laid down on the public.

"Again, the 'poor farmer,' by his own extravagance, or his own inaction, as the case may be, naturally makes himself an easy target for those who can advance him money while helping themselves disproportionately. Here we are face to face with the intensely human side of this whole question.

"Gripped in this fashion, the farmer is virtually helpless, and the man that has the hold upon him is too often the primary intermediary or first link in the chain of foodstuff distribution. In his way the farmer pays dearly for his sacrifice of independence, surrendered wilfully, and the ultimate consumer pays many times more for the farmer's shortsightedness or deplorable lack of business acumen."

Left to right—Frederick H. Allen, the Misses Dorothy, Barbara and Joan, Frederick S. Allen and Julian Allen when he was five years old.
Above—Julian Allen with his ambulance at the front.

This Sixteen-Year-Old Wins Honor in France

Julian Allen, Son of New York Lawyer, Had Early Training of Hero Making Sort

FRANCE has cited for bravery a New York boy of 16, who has been driving an ambulance at the front. He is Julian Broome Livingston Allen, son of Frederick H. Allen, a lawyer of this city, who brought him up on a Spartan plan.

"Learn to do things for yourself," was the principle which ruled the family of two boys and three girls. Julian Allen learned to act and think for himself when he was a little boy. A picture reproduced here shows him at the age of 5 riding his pony up at Pelham Manor, where is situated the country home of the Allens, Bolton Priory. He was inured early to the athletic life. It was not unusual for Mr. Allen and his five children to be up at dawn for a canter over the roads. The boys were proficient in all kinds of sports before they were in their teens.

When Julian was 12 he was sent out to visit an aunt at Colorado Springs. He went all by himself and without even being commended to the good offices of the conductor. When he arrived he had the air of an experienced traveller.

Another influence for efficiency in the bringing up of the young ambulance driver was St. Paul's School, Concord, N. H. It was out of a military encampment intended originally for students of St. Paul's that there developed the junior training camps which were held at Plum Island last summer under the direction of officers of the United States army.

Julian was too young to carry a rifle when the European war began, but from the first he would have liked to enlist. His older brother, Frederick S. Allen, who has since returned to Harvard University, joined the ambulance service. At the age of 14 Julian had become a capable chauffeur. He had a small runabout which he could take apart and put together.

He finally managed to get into the French ambulance service, although he was then barely 15. He has now been driving ambulances and aiding the wounded at the front for more than a year. His fellow ambulance drivers call him "The Kid." The sobriquet fits his age, but not his appearance, for he is 5 feet 9 inches in height and weighs 135 pounds. He is as hard as nails and as supple as wire and has the nerve of a grenadier.

His letters home are filled with the stir and action of the great events in which he is living. He speaks French fluently and his letters bristle with soldier slang and with the terse speech of his native land.

"We have been very busy," he begins one of his letters. "I have had one night's sleep out of the last four and to-night I must work again. This is poste de secours work, and all that we have seen before is child's play compared to this.

"The roads here are awful. Shell holes make them nearly impassable. Fortunately we have the moon to give us some light. We go through the villages, which are continually shelled, and it is not very pleasant. French batteries are right beside the road, and last night during a tir de barrage it was awful. The air was red with shells and the air filled with their whistle and roar.

"The boches, thank heavens, were too busy shelling the trenches to pay any attention to the roads. However, they sent a few gas shells into H——, a village which we must go through. The smell was awful. However, we got through without having to use our masks. Two big 150 shells fell about fifteen yards from us, but they fell on soft ground in a field and did no harm."

Here are some glimpses of the life the boy has been leading as given in another letter:

"I am de piquet for twenty-four hours in this God forsaken village. The dust is covering the roads. For five days now it has not rained and the mud turned to dust. From time to time a shell comes whistling and roaring into houses, already damaged, that line the main road. Flies are everywhere, a black, buzzing mass that sets you crazy, now lighting on your hands and now on your face. The car is covered with them. They are maddening.

"My hands are disgusting. There is no water to be had. Gasojene is more cleansing. I spent the other night in the depths of an abri [dugout or shelter] that smelt of all the disgusting things one could imagine. Beside me a man was snoring loudly; on a bench a malade was coughing steadily. In a corner a blessé was lying on a stretcher, groaning in his tortures. From time to time a brancardier tried to comfort him.

"Outside the steady rumble of passing wagons was heard, then the roar and crash of a shell, the frightened gallop of the horses, the cris of the drivers and cracking of whips! Then all was quiet but for the coughs and the moans and the snores and I fell asleep."

Here is the light hearted way in which he speaks of the narrow escape he had from death:

"Monday night w went to Marre. On the road up we were fired upon by mitrailleuses. Friday night I went up to Marre again. They put several shrapnel shells into the village. One landing just across the street, an eclat hit my helmet and shrapnel balls fell about us."

"New birds are beginning to come in," he writes again. "Sunday night I went up the hill [Le Mort Homme] about midnight. Four of us were outside the abri when suddenly a shell roared in and fell twenty yards distant. Naturally we ducked and fortunately we did. Even so we were struck by falling stones and dirt. I was hit in the neck—just scratched. For two hours the boches shelled the poste and you may be sure we were in the abri."

He describes in detail the dressing or relief station to which he and his comrades were bringing the wounded. He traversed shell torn highways and forded streams in his car.

"When I finally did reach the poste," he goes on, "I was greeted by four shells landing on all sides of me, none more than fifty yards away and one within ten yards. It was impossible to return on the same road with my blessé. I found that there was a mule path through the fields. I could use that and did. I did it without too much trouble and no bad shakes to my blessé. It was the first time since the French had dropped back to their present lines that any vehicle but a two wheeled mule cart had gone to the poste."

"Life is getting more exciting," he writes of an experience during the summer. "We work nearly every night. The boches shell the roads a good deal. The other night a shell fell fifteen feet behind the car."

"The road had been shelled terribly," he wrote a few days later, "and we were just able to get by and up to the poste. The boches were trying all afternoon to get a battery just beside the road and the road was in awful shape when we went through at midnight.

"We started back, but several ravitaillement wagons had fallen into the holes and our road was blocked. We telephoned to have other cars come up to the Calvaire, which was five hundred yards away.

"Two of our cars ran back and forward from the posts and we had to carry our men five hundred yards to the other cars. I can assure you that it was no fun to carry a stretcher over a shell torn road and in mud several inches deep. I thought that my arms would fall off when finally all the blessés were transported.

"We hid our cars as best we could behind a hill where the road was in a defile. Then we walked to the poste about four hundred yards away. As usual the French were very kind and we were put in our stretchers in a dugout to sleep. We spent all day there and at night when the road had been cleared we went back."

Writing under date of September 26 young Allen tells of the coming of the autumn rains.

"It poured down in torrents," he says, "and the roads were rivers of mud and water. In places at our poste especially we had to walk in mud above our knees. For the last five days a thick mud has covered both me and my car."

Throughout the letters appears the ardor of youth. There is a total absence of thought for self as he goes on his errands of mercy along the shell torn roads and the battlefields.

In the official army order in which he is cited Julian Allen is praised for "having volunteered to transport wounded requiring urgent care from relief posts to hospitals over a route in sight of the enemy, frequently shelled and swept by machine gun fire, a fine example of bravery and endurance."

In view of what the lad has done his father thinks that it is time that he returned to his own country. Julian was in the fourth form at St. Paul's when he went abroad. His family want him to come back now and begin work under a tutor so that he will be able to enter Harvard next fall. So application has been duly made for his discharge, and they hope to see him back by Christmas Day.

His sisters made their debut at a dance at Sherry's given on the night of the day on which the newspapers printed the cable despatch telling of the honor which had come to their brother at the front.